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ABSTRACT

Research that purports to judge communicative sophistication on the basis of the revising behaviors of students must control for at least three variables: the subjective difficulty of the task; the student's ability to generate alternate wordings, spellings, and the like; and the student's preferred strategies of composing. Revising is not a substrategy of writing in the same way as are planning, transcribing, and reviewing, but is a retranscribing after the already-existing text is reviewed and found wanting. The review takes place in terms of understood conventions of written language, intended effect, intended meaning, intended audience, and intended persona of the writer. Three false premises of some of the research on revision are as follows: revision is a one-time process that occurs at the end of the writing session, difficulty of task makes no difference in the appearance of revising behaviors, and evidence from the text comprises the only data needed in analyzing behaviors. The study of revising is complex because in revising the writer uses the products of all the subprocesses of writing in a complex pattern-matching operation. (TJ)

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REVISING: TOWARD A THEORY

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Recent research indicates that one of the major differences between skilled adult writers and unskilled adult writers is the way they approach the task of revising their own writing. Sommers (1978) found that skilled adults evidenced complex, recursive revising strategies, first revising their work mainly to reflect globally what they wanted to say and what they expect their readers to understand and then revising mainly locally to conform to the conventions of written standard English. Thus skilled writers tended to revise by adding and deleting large chunks of discourse first, then considering mainly the felicities of sentences and words. Unskilled writers, on the other hand, were stuck at the word level: they very seldom added or deleted paragraphs or changed the structure of sentences. Instead they appeared to view revision as a matter of "finding the right word" and changing their prose to conform to their conception of the rules of written English. Indeed, Beach (1976) suggested that sophistication of the revising strategies would be an excellent indicator of the developmental level of adult writers.

This suggestion must be accepted with great caution. Research that purports to judge communicative sophistication from the revising behaviors of students must control for at least three variables: (1) the subjective difficulty of the task, (2) the student's ability to generate alternate wordings, spellings, and the like and (3) the student's preferred strategies of composing. This talk will explore the reasons why

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such controls must be made. It will best explain the place of revising in a general theory of the writing process and then show how studies which ignore the entire process obscure our understanding of revising rather than aid it.

Writing may usefully be viewed as a solution to a complex communication problem. When psychologists study solutions to other complex problems, they typically identify three stages: planning the solution, carrying out the plan, and reviewing the results to judge if they meet the criteria for good solutions. For writing we can call the three processes planning, transcribing, and reviewing and schematize the process as in Figure 1 in your handout. The recursive arrows on the left of the diagram in Figure 1 remind us that planning, transcribing and reviewing are not one-time processes, as composition textbooks would have students believe. Rather the text grows and changes, planning, transcribing and reviewing what has been written occur in irregular patterns.

Revising then is not a subprocess in the same way as planning, transcribing and reviewing are; rather it is the retranscribing of text already produced after a portion of the already existing text is reviewed and found wanting. That is, if a review of the text against criteria for good text results in the decision that the text does not meet criteria and a writer can also generate a more acceptable solution, then the already composed text will be changed. If the writer cannot generate a more acceptable solution or if he or she is satisfied with his or her text, he or she will not change it.

What is the text reviewed against? Chiefly, the understood conventions of written language and four products of the preceding planning process:

(1) intended effect

(2) intended meaning

(3) intended audience and

(4) intended persona of the writer.

These five entities are represented in Figure 1 under Products, though, obviously the knowledge of the conventions of written English is not a product of planning for a particular communication task, while the other intentions are.

In reviewing the text memories of it-what it said, how it sounded, how it looked-are refreshed by rereading . These memories are then evaluated--matched against the complex intentions of the writer. The complexity of the review process, then, is bounded by the complexity of the planning process that has preceeded it: if no elaborate intended meaning or effect has been planned, the text's remembered meaning or effect cannot be evaluated against it. Similarly, if no intended audience or intended writer's persona has been constructed, the text cannot be evaluated against them. Thus, texts written with minimal planning--say "free writing" exercises chronicling random thoughts--can be reviewed only against criteria that are constant across all communication tasks; that is, adherence to the conventions of written English. Young writers--who normally do not make elaborate plans about effect, meaning, audience and persona--can be expected to review their texts only against the conventions of written English they hold in memory on the

other hand, older children or adult unskilled writers can be expected to review also against their intended meaning probably, unaffected by the constraints a particular audience may place upon the writing. It is only when a writer becomes quite skilled and quite sophisticated socially that he can imagine and respond more than rudimentally to the varying needs of audiences in both planning an reviewing.

To judge a text against intentions requires that the text's meaning and effect, (for an audience) be determined separately from the writer's intended meaning and effect. This ability to construct a separate text meaning appears to be late-developing in children.

What is interesting about revising is (1) the inferences we can make about how developed a writer appears to be and (2) the inferences we can make about the underlying representations (the effect, meaning, audience, writer) and the knowledge (of language and conventions) against which the writer may be evaluating his or her text.

But extreme care must be taken in studies that purport to help us understand the composing process--particularly review and revision--that these inferences are not based on false premises. Let me discuss a study on revision by the National Assessment of Educational Progress (1977) that makes four major misassumptions. I cite this study so that other researchers will avoid them.

Incorrect assumption #1: Revision is a one-time process that occurs at the end of a writing session.

The NAEP gave nine-, thirteen- and seventeen-years-olds a

writing assignment on which they wrote for fifteen minutes in pencil. Then they were given pens and thirteen additional minutes to revise their work. No penned revisions were made by 40% of the nine-year-olds, 22% of the thirteen-year-olds, and 32% of the seventeen-year-olds. However, the NAEP did not make an attempt to account for the pencilled revisions made on the pencilled draft, even though we know that review and revision occur irregularly thoughout the writing of a text.

Incorrect assumption #2: Difficulty of task makes no difference in the appearance of revising behaviors.

The NAEP gave nine- and thirteen-year-olds the same task: to make a report on the moon for their science class. The students were given six facts about the moon, but told that they could add others if they wished. The seventeen-year-olds were given a different, easier task: to write a complaint to a grocer who had given a younger family member bruised peaches. As Table 1 in your handout shows, thirteen-year-olds revised more than nine-year-olds in nearly every category, but seventeen-year-olds revised less than thirteen-year-olds in nearly every category. However, one chould not infer that beyond thirteen-year-old children stop reviewing their work: the seventeen-year-olds probably revised less because the task was easy enough that they performed well on the first draft.

What is interesting about the NAEP data is that even though the Moon Report task was probably easier for the thirteen-year-olds than the nine-year-olds, they knew

more facts about the moon, made more school reports and learned the conventions of written English. But even so, the thirteen-year-olds made more revisions than the younger. These data suggests a complex developmental relationship between amount learned and the increasing use of strategies. That is that thirteen-year-olds knew how to revise when asked to, they produced more revisions than nine-year-olds even though the task was probably easier from them to begin with.

In addition, the thirteen-year-olds evidenced the most growth over nine-year-olds in two categories: organizational and transitional. We can infer with some confidence that the thirteen-year-olds made far more changes in organization because their planning processes had matured enough to allow them to conceive of the discourse as a whole with large chunks that could be rearranged to meet the needs of logic and of other audience considerations. A similar interpretation could be advanced for the addition of transitional devices: thirteen-year-olds were learning to mark the contours of their arguments so that their readers could not miss them. This increasing flexibility and concern for the reader is indeed the sign of predictable cognitive and social development.

Generally, we can hypothesize that the more difficult the task, the more revising will occur in the writing of students above the age of thirteen. This hypothesis is reasonable because of the writer's limited attention: when given a difficult task, the writer must attend to many aspects of the problem. Even performance on fairly

well-learned conventions of writing (such as spelling or sentence structure) can be expected to deteriorate on the first draft of a difficult task. Maimon and Nodine's research (1978) clearly shows this phenomenon for college-age writers. If given enough time through, writers who review will catch errors and infelicities.

The simple hypothesized relationship between difficulty of task and number of revisions in the writing of students thirteen and over is complicated by the introduction of individual differences in composing strategies. If a writer prefers to "write off the top of his/her head" and then to revise extensively until a draft takes shape, we can hypothesize that he or she will exhibit more revising behaviors than a writer who plans extensively before beginning a draft. The researcher, then must also control for strategical style before making inferences about the sophistication of a particular writer's review (and related planning) processes.

Incorrect assumption #3: <u>Evidence from the text is the only data needed in analysing revising behaviors</u>.

In order to analyze usefully the revising behaviors of writers, we need to infer with confidence the <u>impetus</u> for their revisions: in making a change, is the writer's primary consideration (1) following conventions of written English, as he or she understands them, (2) bringing the text's meaning closer to his own or (3) making the structure and meaning of the text more accessible to the reader (in other ways than the merely conventional or(4) more

reflective of the persona he/she wants to project? The NAEP data gives us imperfect raw material for inferences about impetus for change.

The first three NAEP categories on Table 1--cosmetic, mechanical and grammatical--are pretty much unequivocally impelled by the writer's understanding of conventions. But continuational and informational changes, both involving the addition of more information to the text, may be caused by either the need to reflect a developing intended meaning or to flesh out a preexisting plan in order to produce a longer text or to explain a more in smaller steps for the audience's benefit. If we take continuational changes to stem from a growing number of things to say and informational changes to stem mainly from additions for an audience's sake, then we can interpret the shift in thirteen-year-olds' revising patterns from finding new things to say to making them better understood by an audience. This interpretation is consistent with one I have already made about the changes in organizational and transitional categories between thirteen-year-olds and nine-year-olds. But I made that interpretation by assuming that organizational changes arose from planning for audiences-- they might just as well arise from the need to better represent the writer's intended meaning, separate from consideration of audience. Unless we ask writers about the impetus or their revisions--particularly in hazy categories like stylistic or holistic--we cannot make these important distinctions.

Incorrect assumption #4: Reporting raw numbers of revision is useful.

The NAEP study give us some indication about the amount of revising that students did, but little about the final success of their effort. Perl (1978) shows us that beginning adult writers make many revisions on their first drafts, but their efforts often result in worse drafts rather than better ones. Indications about how much revising was left to do in order to produce an A+ copy of that draft are necessary before inferences can be drawn about the writer's knowledge and sophistication.

Despite the relative accesibility of data on revising, the study of this aspect of the composing process is probably more complex than study of any of the subprocesses: planning, transcribing or reviewing. The complexity arises because, in revising the writer uses the products of all the subprocesses in a complex pattern-matching operation. Then if the writer can generate a more acceptable alternative, he/she retranscribes or revises the text. But this regeneration may also lead the writer back to planning or to search outside sources for information before retranscription. Studies of revising must take into account the full complexity of the impetus for and results of this behavior. Those that do not distort, not edify, our understanding.

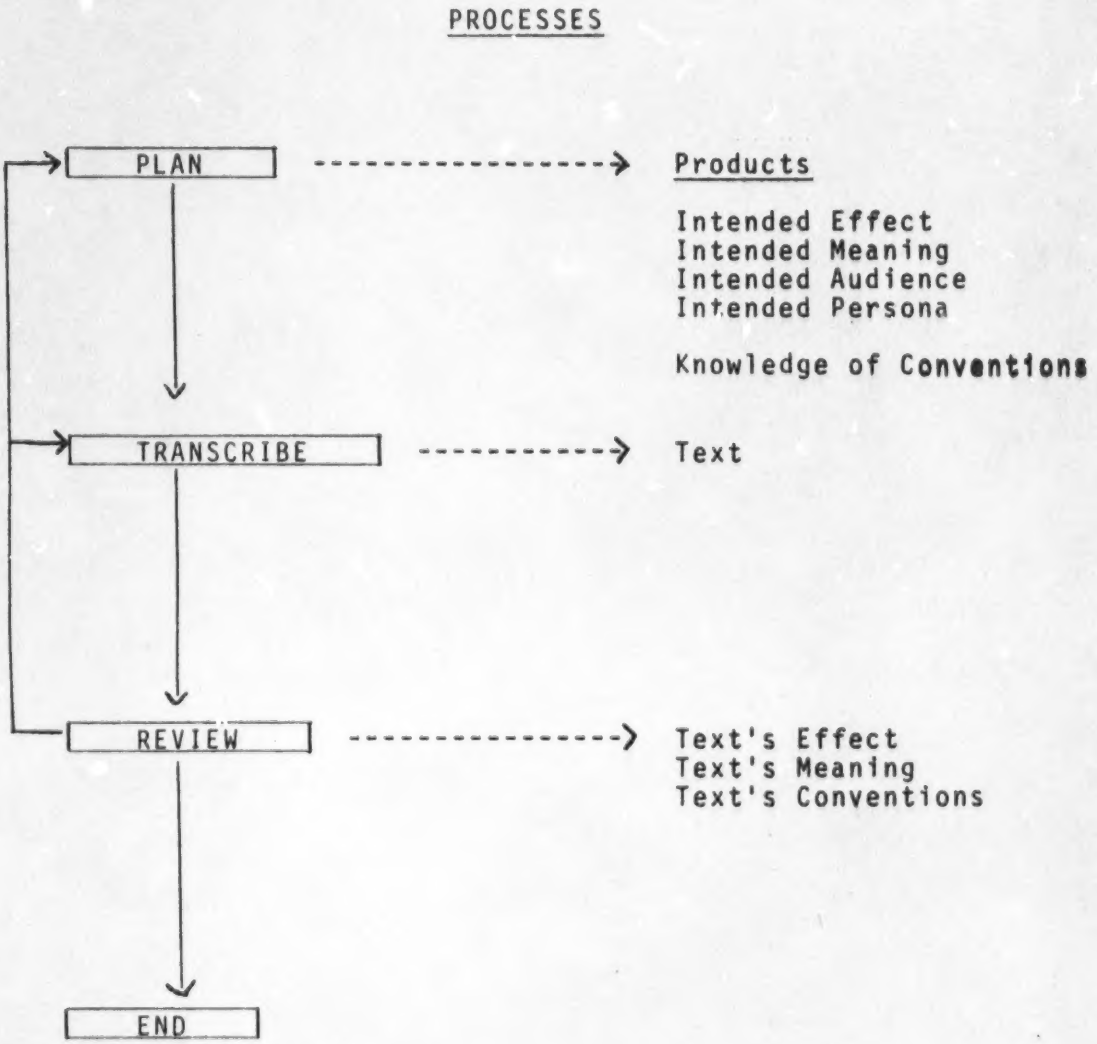

Figure 1. A Simplified Model of the Writing Process

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TABLE 1

Percent of Students Making Different Kinds of Revisions in Pen

	% 9-year-olds* Moon Reports	% 13-year-olds Moon Report	% 17-year-olds** Letter
Cosmetic	21	14	8
Mechanical	46	68	39
Grammatical	37	47	15
Continuational	34	28	--
Informational	42	61	58
Stylistic	43	68	59
Transitional	10	31	11
Organizational	11	23	8
Holistic	6	5	11

* These figures are rounded off for quick comparison only. They are the % of students who revised at all who made these kinds of changes. 60% of the 9-year-olds, 78% of the 13-year-olds and 68% of the 17-year-olds revised in pen.

** These figures were interpalated from a bar graph. Accurate to ± 3 percent.

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